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Parents of excluded pupils: Customers, partners, or problems?

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In this paper we present new data from interviews with parents of pupils permanently excluded from alternative provision in England, and related service providers. We report the social contexts of the families, their experience of 'choice', and how service providers talk about them. Our findings support those from earlier studies in relation to the disadvantage experienced by many parents. As predicted, the parents experienced choice as very limited. Some parents, due to a lack of personal, social or economic resources, felt unable to engage with the parental choice agenda beyond vetoing options. Our data suggests that service providers talk about parents as problems rather than as equal partners. How parents are viewed is shaped both by their level of compliance and their access to resources. We conclude by considering the potential of the 'parental choice' discourse to provide a more positive re-framing of parents.

Keywords: parents; partnership; choice; school exclusion; anti-social behaviour.

Introduction

The data reported here concern the families of pupils in England who have been permanently excluded from alternative provision (Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) or special school), rather than excluded (permanently or otherwise) from mainstream schools. The excluded pupils have reached 'the end of the line' in terms of available educational provision. In this paper we examine both the circumstances of the 24 families in the study, their experience of exercising parental choice, and the ways in which service providers talk about them. This is an important area, as the attitudes towards and beliefs about the parents that service providers hold will inevitably shape the nature of any partnership. Whilst the proper nature of partnership working is open to debate (Murray 2000) there is no doubting the reality that parents and providers working well together benefits the young person (Bridges 1994).

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The findings presented in this paper add to a growing body of evidence about the experiences of, and identities open to, parents of young people who have been permanently excluded from alternative provision (McDonald and Thomas 2003; Smith 2009). Not all of the families in this study could be described as ‘typical’ of families of excluded pupils, who previous studies have found to be often under financial or emotional stress and experiencing multiple social disadvantage (Daniels et al. 2003; MacRae, Maguire and Milbourne 2003). In contrast, a number of parents in this study had access to a range of personal, social and economic resources. Moreover, social disadvantage appeared to have some impact upon how parents were perceived by service providers. We found that parents from more disadvantaged backgrounds were positioned either as ‘to blame’ (for example because of perceived lack of interest, prioritising their own needs, or a refusal to accept help), or alternatively as much ‘a victim’ of circumstances as their child. However, parents with access to resources were positioned as ‘pests’ (our word), they were seen as over involved, and as making unrealistic demands for resources for their child. In this paper we consider the potential of the ‘parental choice’ discourse to provide a more positive re-framing of some of these parents.

The interviews with parents (mostly, but not exclusively mothers) and service providers reported here were conducted as part of a three year longitudinal study into the routes, destinations and outcomes for pupils permanently excluded from special schools and Pupil Referral Units which was commissioned in 2006 by the then DfES, the main findings from which have been reported elsewhere (DCSF 2009; Pirrie et al. 2010). It is important to be clear what this paper is not about: we neither explore the causes of disruptive behaviour, nor claim to uncover how service providers would discuss the role of parents had they been explicitly asked to reflect on the topic. Rather, it is about how a sample of service providers talked about parents in the course of research conversations with a related, though different focus.

We use data generated through interviews with service providers to explore further the various parental identities that are evident in service providers’ every-day talk. In particular we focus on how the perceived compliance of the family and their level of resources (financial, social and personal) seem to be factors in how they are viewed by service providers. The complex interaction between service providers and

families needs to be considered against the background of how social policy in respect of families has evolved over the last few decades. It is to this issue that we now turn, first by examining the notion of parents as consumers, then exploring the development of the role of parents in policy relating to anti-social behaviour and suggestions from research as to how this has affected the parental experience.

Parents as customers

The evolution of the role of the parent in social policy outlined below has been played out in the context of the global rise of neo-liberalism (Small 2011). Although tempered by New Labour attempts to ‘soften’ the neo-liberal agenda through an emphasis on social responsibility, the last 40 years have seen the reform of economic and social organisation towards competitive and individualised models. Within UK Education policy this is epitomised in the ‘shift in government rhetoric from a view of service users as passive recipients to active choosers’ (Wilkins 2010: 171). The neo-liberal project is founded on a belief in humans as rational choice makers with choices based on maximum utility: the best possible outcome for oneself. Research on parental choice in education focuses on how parents make choices about which school they wish their child to attend. However, choice of school is rarely a matter of selecting between school A or B with straightforward, easily compared, outcomes. For example, Oria et al. (2007) described the struggles of parents as they negotiate the tensions between the interests of their child and the public good.

It has been argued that the exercise of school choice is a process that is inscribed by social class (Reay and Ball 1997). Parental choice is difficult enough for the advantaged middle classes, who not only have financial resources (enabling them, for example, to live in the ‘right’ area) but also, according to Reay and Ball (1997), are more likely to be viewed by schools as their parents of choice. The preference of schools for a particular kind of parent and pupil has been accentuated by the climate of performance and accountability in which schools are operating (Rogers 2006). Thus the process of choice is more complicated, with available options often more limited, for those who don’t fit the middle class norms, or for whom there are additional factors to be taken into account, such as special educational needs (SEN) (Bagley, Woods and Woods 2001).

Far from being equal partners, the position of parents of pupils with SEN in the process of school choice has been widely acknowledged to be one of disempowerment (Rogers 2006). In many cases there are groups that support parents in their dealings with schools and local authorities. However this is generally not the case for the families of children with behavioural difficulties who lack advocacy groups working on their behalf and who are more often living in already difficult circumstances. Thus whilst the policy rhetoric is one of parents as consumers, actively choosing between clear options, the extent to which this maps on to the reality for many parents is disputed, with parents of pupils with disruptive behaviour likely to face multiple difficulties in relation to school choice.

Parental responsibility for their child's anti-social behaviour

The idea that parents ought to be held responsible for the behaviour of their children, and that 'inadequate' or 'poor' parenting and family dysfunction lies behind 'anti-social behaviour' of young people is a familiar theme in both policy and popular discourses in the United Kingdom (MacRae et al. 2003). As Goldson and Jamieson (2002) show, however, the idea that 'improper conduct' of parents is the cause of indiscipline in children is nothing new, with documents from as early as 1816 professing this view:

It is apprehended that, in the many cases which have come before this Society, the number of boys is very small, whose original tendencies to do wrong have not sprung from the improper conduct of parents...the error of parents have done much to encourage the criminal propensities of their children...

Committee for Investigating the Causes of Alarming Increase of Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis, 1816: paras 11-12 (cited in Goldson and Jamieson 2002: 83)

McLaughlin and Muncie (1993) examined the role of the family in the history of juvenile delinquency and justice in the United Kingdom. They identify the paradox that the family has variously been seen as responsible for delinquent behaviour *and* as the best place for such behaviour to be controlled. In the post-war period the importance of family relationships was emphasised, and delinquency was seen as a result of difficulties within families 'who had been "left behind" in the advancement of

post-war prosperity and meritocracy' (McLaughlin and Muncie 1993:161). A new model of response emerged which sought to 'treat' families rather than to punish individual children.

With the election of the Conservative government in 1979 the focus returned to the responsibility of individuals for their own criminal behaviour. The welfare state was seen as having created dependency on the state and therefore as having undermined the family. The solution was to force parents to take responsibility for their children. The election of New Labour under Tony Blair in 1997 saw a continuation of this theme of parental responsibility with the introduction of the *Crime and Disorder Act* (1998) which introduced 'parenting orders' as one of a raft of new interventions for dealing with 'anti-social behaviour', particularly among young people. A plethora of follow-up legislation, guidance and initiatives followed (Sadler 2008), in particular the *Anti-social Behaviour Act* 2003 that extended the circumstances in which parenting orders could be made. In 2005 the Respect Task Force was launched, which had at the centre the key concerns of parental responsibility and anti-social behaviour (Jamieson 2005).

With the change in leadership of the Labour party there was a change in emphasis away from 'enforcement', and the explicit desire to 'correct' the lower class (McCarthy 2011). Gordon Brown was an advocate of 'Early Intervention', the idea that by identifying 'at risk' communities and offering support, the numbers of young people moving into anti-social behaviour would decrease. This approach is not without its difficulties; in a study of the Scottish model of youth justice McAra and McVie (2005) found that rather than reducing offending, early intervention had the effect of widening the net of young people caught up in the youth justice system, and that once in, it was very difficult to get out. McCarthy (2011) suggests that the 'net widening' reported in the Edinburgh study, and the focus of legislation on already socially marginalised communities leads to a form of social control. McCarthy's argument, supported by data from a two-year ethnographic study, is that individual professionals involved in offering support are left to make judgements about who is 'at-risk' of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour. This in turn becomes reduced to a judgement about the 'moral respectability' of the people with whom they are working. McCarthy presents evidence to show how judgements about who may be 'at risk' rest

on ‘banal symptoms of potential offending’ (2011:8), like having an untidy house or unruly children, but he argues that these are class-based judgements. Being ‘lower class’ becomes something that in and of itself needs to be corrected.

McCarthy (2011) found that in discussions between professionals at case conferences, the degree of perceived cooperation of the family with the agencies became a strong determining factor in how the family would be treated. By accepting the intervention of the support services the families appeared to be actively involved in (or at least accepting of) their positioning as ‘in need of correction’. Further, those families who were seen as ‘co-operative’ were subject to fewer sanctions, than those families with similar behaviour who were less co-operative. The theme of ‘compliance’ resonates with Tett’s (2001) work exploring the different conceptualisations of the role of the parent among some case studies of providers of family literacy and parent education programmes. Tett argued that ‘the assumption that pervades many parents’ education programmes is that it is not the fault of the school if they fail to educate disadvantaged children rather it is mothers who are blamed...’ (2001: 193). As with McCarthy’s (2011) ethnography of pre-court case conferences, Tett (2001) suggested that as long as parents are in agreement with the views of teachers all is well, but as soon as a parent expresses unhappiness or disagreement they are seen as a ‘problem’ and therefore as incapable of being in a genuine partnership with the school. Parents can be part of the solution, but only if they accept that they need to change and are willing and able to accept the guidance from the professionals.

Policy documents from the last few years evidence a continuation of the view that holding parents responsible is a key weapon in the war against anti-social behaviour. The *Youth Crime Action Plan* 2008, in the last years of the Labour administration, includes the statement:

We are sending a clear message to parents. Most parents do a great job, and for those who are struggling we will offer more support; but for those who do not take their responsibilities seriously we will challenge them to do so.

(HM Government, 2008)

Interestingly, this approach to parents of children who are considered to have anti-social behaviour can be compared to the government advice, from around the same time, on building relationships with parents of young people with Special Educational Needs more generally. In the document *Working With Parents in Partnership* (DES, 2007) the 'Expert Model' of partnership working is rejected in favour of a 'Family Partnership Model' (Crozier and Davies 2007) that includes the following guidance:

The notion of power is complex in any relationship, but we assume that partnership involves a notion of equality at least in relation to decision-making. Participants should share the power to decide all aspects of the process of helping, although over time we would anticipate the parents becoming the senior partner.

(DES, 2007: 12)

This difference in tone may be attributable, at least in part, to the association between being identified as at risk of anti-social behaviour and social class, a link which doesn't occur with most other categories of SEN (Macleod and Munn 2004). It would appear that parents of children with, for example, a sensory impairment, can 'share the power' whereas parents of the badly behaved need to be 'challenged', and in McCarthy's terms, 'corrected'.

The idea that parents can legitimately be held responsible for their child's behaviour is particularly evident in studies which have focused on disruptive behaviour in school. Such studies have consistently revealed that teachers see the family as one of the main reasons for a child's disruptive behaviour (Mavropoulou and Padelidiadu 2002). In addition to being one of the first places to look to find the 'cause' of problems, and in line with the paradox identified by Muncie and McLaughlin (1993), in some cases parents have been seen as the key point of intervention – fix the parents and you'll have fixed the child (Broadhead, Chilton and Crichton 2009; Lauth, Otte and Heubeck 2009).

A number of overlapping themes, have emerged from this brief exploration of the changing position of families in social policy relating to disruptive behaviour of young people. These following themes provide the analytical framework for the

remainder of this paper: the variety of roles imposed on parents (consumers, potential partners, causes and cures), the issue of compliance, and how disadvantage articulates with all of the above.

Method

The research was conducted in England and the final study sample comprised 28 young people (including 2 young women), aged between 9 and 14 at the time of their permanent exclusion. All of the young people had multiple and complex support needs, most commonly Behaviour Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD). As might be expected from a study of this kind, many of the young people were considered by service providers to be at an extreme end of a spectrum of needs, with the phrase ‘high tariff’ commonly used.

In addition to interviews with the young people, the research team conducted interviews with families (22 interviews with 13 parents, mostly in the family home) and front-line service providers (n = 72, mostly face-to-face in work setting). Service providers included head teachers, teachers and school support staff, Youth Offending Team workers, family therapists, training providers, psychiatrists, prison officers, education welfare officers and social workers. Data from the formal interviews with service providers were supplemented by information gathered through a series of less formal contacts by telephone and email.

The aim of the interviews with family and service providers was to elicit their perspectives on the events leading up to the permanent exclusion; decision-making after the exclusion, and appropriateness of the current placement for the young person. Both family and service provider interviews were semi-structured, all interviews were recorded and transcribed and were analysed first by simple content analysis (guided by the specific research questions), and then using a constant comparative approach.

At no point were service providers asked what they thought of the families with whom they worked. The data reported here reflects their ‘everyday’ talk about families that *may* differ substantially from what they would have said had they been explicitly asked the question. We are aware of the need to be cautious in what we can infer from this data. However, at the very least we would argue that ‘everyday’ talk

will reflect beliefs and attitudes, and that as such it constitutes a valuable source of data from which it is possible to draw inferences about how parents may be positioned.

Findings (1) the families

In relation to employment, the parents fall into 2 groups, those in employment or with a history of stable employment, and those without. Information about employment came from the families themselves, although service providers also often raised it as a factor. In many cases the nature and degree of the young person's needs had led a parent to give up work in order to stay at home. Some of these parents were actively involved in trying to secure the most appropriate provision for their child. Two parents reported having successfully taken the local authority to a tribunal regarding placement in an independent schools. Although many of these parents have children with complex needs, usually involving some degree of autistic spectrum disorder, this is not the case with all. Some were parents of children identified as having BESD with no co-morbidity, in other words the difference between these and the other parents is not easily explained by the difficulty or 'diagnosis' attached to the child.

There are commonalities across both groups of families, the details of these are constructed from data from all three sets of interviews: family, young person and service providers. While the language used to describe the situation varied, for example service providers talked more often in terms of formal medical diagnosis, whereas parents were more likely to talk less formally, e.g. 'I'm on tablets for my nerves' [Leo's mother¹], the basic information given did not conflict. Most of the family backgrounds could be described as difficult or disrupted with only three of the 28 young people living in a household with two people they regard as their parents. Almost all of the young people are based with their mother and many see their father (or the person in the paternal role) only occasionally and irregularly. Mental ill-health among both the young people and their parents was also common. These findings are in line with those of Daniels et al. (2003) who studied permanent exclusion from mainstream schools.

¹ The names of the young people and their families have been changed.

The data from interviews with service providers and those in a parental role suggest that the relationship between family circumstances and the young person's behaviour is a complex one. In some cases the typical difficult and disrupted family background clearly pre-dates the permanent exclusion of the young person whereas in others the difficulties experienced by the young person and the difficulties encountered by the family appear to have been involved in a more obviously complex iterative relationship. For example, Joe's mother, Kate, talked powerfully about her periods of depression coinciding with periods when Joe was excluded from school

He was out of school for months and it was left up to me to find a place for him, the onus was on me, but my depression was bad and the strain of having him at home began to take its toll on me.

The strain put on families by having to deal with a young person out of education for extended periods of time was evident. Some parents explicitly attributed the fact that they were not in paid employment to having to care for their child at home. Sasrutha was often violent towards his mother and so his father had given up full-time work to be able to stay in the house all day. Phil's mother had given up work to look after her son after he was permanently excluded from a special school. Ivan's mother had found it difficult to keep any regular employment as she had to repeatedly take time off work to care for her son. She worked for a friend as and when she could and when there were hours available. Jake's mother had given up work to try a period of home education when she felt that there was nothing being offered by the local authority.

The extent to which parents reported exercising choice about what happened to their child post exclusion varied. Those who were in employment, or had a history of employment prior to the permanent exclusion were more likely to report taking the initiative to contact different support services and possible placements and felt that they took the lead in maintaining regular contact with service providers. Whilst some parents readily took up the challenge of going on a series of visits to possible schools this was resisted by others who would wait for something to be suggested and then either reject or accept it. For some this appears to be part of a broader pattern of lack

of engagement in their child's education, but for others it seems that the demands being made are beyond what the parent feels able to offer. Joe's mother (quoted above) felt that her already fragile mental health suffered as a consequence of being given the responsibility of identifying a school in a borough into which she had only recently moved.

Some parents were invited to visit possible placements to see if they would be appropriate. However a number questioned whether this represented being offered a 'choice'.

I applied to 15 schools, I visited 5 of them, but all of them said they could not take Leo.

[Patricia, mother of Leo]

Although the talk is of parental choice it's meaningless if the schools aren't willing to take the young person. Options are raised but it's about where there is a place, and of course about whether the authority would pay.

[Jenny, mother of Jake]

The ability of a family to become, and remain, involved appears to depend upon their resources – in the broadest sense. Leo's mother who visited five schools does not drive and has mobility difficulties, all of these visits were either by taxi at her own expense, or she was driven by her adult daughter. Jenny talked about the network of adult friends whom she relied on to help her occupy Jake during his periods out of school, this support enabled her to resist a placement which she felt was unsuitable. In Angela's case she talks about how much it has cost her financially to pursue what she wanted for her son.

I had no idea when I undertook it how much it would take out of me when I went to tribunal – it cost thousands, I had to pay for a private Speech and Language report and Ed Psych report to look at available schools. Had [the school] said they would take him without trial the judgment would have been that we would have been reimbursed – but as it was they weren't and we had to pay. I am the credit card queen.

[Angela, mother of Phil]

None of the parents who we interviewed described a simple process of

identifying a school or provision that they felt would be suitable for their child and having their child subsequently placed there. Although they felt they had little power to get what they wanted they did report having more ability to resist placements that they felt were unsuitable, usually because of distance from home or (as Daniels et al. 2003 found) because of concerns about the existing population of the placement.

Findings (2) the service providers' perspectives

In the service providers' comments on the families of the young people three main ways of talking about the families emerge. They are either seen as a/the main cause of the 'problem'; as well intentioned but limited; or as pushy and demanding. In the section below we present data exemplifying these parental identities that we have grouped under the headings of 'poor parenting', 'poor parents' and 'pests'. In only one case were the parents perceived as being supportive and competent to offer that support.

i) *'poor parenting'*. The majority of the comments about parents and family background can be categorised as describing 'poor parenting'. Service providers talk about the home situation as being the cause of the young person's problems.

Mother had great difficulty controlling his behaviour....We couldn't influence the home environment and the home environment was the rock bottom of the problem

[Residential care worker]

Some service providers pointed to family breakdown as a fundamental issue, specifically breakdown resulting in the needs of the child not being prioritised:

'the root cause was the breakdown in the structure of his family he was just. Like, left to survive almost'

[Teacher in Alternative Provision]

For others there was frustration that the family rejected support offered:

'mother refused to engage with mental health and family support services'

[Social worker]

'there are lots of problems in the family, addiction issues, and in the house, but housing have been at the door a number of times and been turned away, mum just wont accept help'

[Youth Offending Team worker]

The implication in these examples is that the parents are, at least to some degree, 'to blame'. For a very small number of families the parents were seen not just as passive but as actively colluding with the young people to resist intervention. A teacher at Ken's school reported that not only was Ken joyriding when he was 14, but that his father was in the car with him. Stuart had been out of school for 14 months. The Head of the Alternative Provision service expressed frustration at what she saw as his mother undermining attempts to find somewhere for him to go.

'Mum colludes with him in turning down placements, we set up group tutoring in the local library and mum said she didn't want Stuart going there because he'd be 'at risk', she just wants him to be at home with her.'

[Head of Alternative Provision]

ii) *'poor parents'*. Parents in this group are seen as having the best interests of their child at heart but being unable to provide what the child requires, they are 'poor' parents in terms of lacking resources, either personal, social or economic. Most often this is expressed as the parents being unable to set appropriate boundaries because of their own emotional needs. There is also reference made to home circumstances in terms of accommodation, and other perceived limitations in 'with-it-ness', knowing what needs to be done and how to make it happen, and how to access the resources required to make it happen.

'Ivan is immature - very spoilt – he's an only child, has a wonderful mum who cares enormously - mum wants to make it right ... but there are no boundaries'

[Head of Inclusion Service]

'Peter's parents are becoming proud of him and having their support is important. He lives with his father and mother, she works and is involved in her mother's care. Mum has health problems of her own. It's a stable family background, but they seem really isolated and there's no sense of them being able to take the initiative to give him what he needs'

[Training provider]

'Simon started to go to a residential facility for respite care when his behaviour deteriorated after the death of his father when he was nine, and when his mother's new partner moved in with his son. The family accommodation was cramped, he had to sleep on the sofa in the living room and the living conditions seemed to cause a lot of violent outbursts. Mum comes in to see him whenever she can and comes to every meeting'

[Head of Special School]

Although the way in which the service providers talk about these first two kinds of parents is evident, it is the judgement that is being made which is different, rather than the actual behaviour reported. When examining what makes a parent identified as culpable and a cause of the problem rather than as much a victim as their child, it is noticeable that the more overlap between what the service provider thinks is in the best interests of the child and what the parent thinks the more likely the parent is to be seen as a 'poor soul'. This resonates with McCarthy (2011) and Tett's (2001) findings, and the observation that a 'good' parent is a 'compliant' parent. Both Stuart and Ivan have mothers who are seen to be using their children to meet their own emotional needs - Stuart's mother's to have company, Ivan's mother's to have another person in an adult role in the house. However Ivan's mother is seen as compliant, she does not challenge the school or other services; whereas Stuart's mother is seen as an obstacle to the implementation of the service provider's plans.

iii) *'pests'*. For this final group of parents the perception is that they err on the side of being too involved. They are seen as pushy and troublemakers and are liable to take legal action if they don't get what they want. This group of parents overlaps almost exactly with the group of parents who have been, or are currently, in full-time employment. The loss of paid employment doesn't just mean the household income is reduced but also, resulted in some parents with a history of being in work finding themselves at home with their child, with little adult contact and little on which to focus their energies other than securing what they consider to be an appropriate placement for their child.

Mum is very involved, and has clear ideas about Jake's needs. Mum is a bit unpredictable

[SEN Case Officer]

[laughing] I'm sure Mrs Sanmor will be delighted to see you....you'd better plan on a couple of hours at least, she has boxes and boxes of all the paperwork dating back to when Leo was a baby...she'll be able to give you chapter and verse.

[Alternative Provision head teacher]

It will be interesting to hear what she tells you. She's not been happy with how things have gone and she's made no secret out of it, she's never off the phone to this office

[Head of Inclusion team re Angela, mother of Phil]

Typically the disagreements between parents and service providers were over the most appropriate placement for the young person, with parents in a number of cases requesting that the local authority pay for an 'out of authority' placement in specialist provision. They had the resources to research what was available and to make a case that their child ought to receive it.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study support those from earlier work (Tett 2001; McDonald and Thomas 2003) in that service providers see parents as part of the problem (particularly when they are non-compliant). None of the service providers talked about parents as genuine partners: they were either to blame, or too limited (in terms of personal, social and/or economic resources) to be able to effect change, or too demanding and unrealistic. In this section of the paper we argue that the almost universal positioning parents as problematic is not a good basis on which to expect partnership. Further, we suggest a possible re-conceptualisation of non-compliant behaviour which may allow parents to be seen in a more positive light.

It appears that there is a restricted set of positions that are available to these parents, none of which are empowering and all of which seem to hinge on the degree to which they agree with service providers and on their access to resources, their family's 'capital' in all senses of the word. Only one pair of parents in this study appeared to have avoided the three more negative constructions: they had resources to support their child and did not challenge the local authority to provide more. It does not seem possible for a 'resourceful' parent to disagree with the service provider and

remain viewed in a positive light. These families (the ‘pests’) were less likely to exhibit the ‘banal symptoms’ associated with the moral judgements reported by McCarthy (2011). They are therefore perhaps less easily categorised as ‘deficit’ and in need of correction, instead they are viewed as trouble because of their pursuit of services for their children.

The paradox identified by Muncie and McLaughlin (1993), that families are seen as both the cause of the problem and the locus for solving the problem, persists. It would appear that some parents are expected to exercise their responsibilities in relation to their children’s anti-social behaviour within the context of a ‘partnership’ in which they are positioned as not competent to do so. For those parents who are viewed as ‘competent’, their efforts to secure what they consider to be the best for their child leads them to be seen as trouble of a different kind. This group too are denied the kind of partnership anticipated by the DES in 2007 in which ‘we would anticipate the parents becoming the senior partner’ (DES 2007).

Under different governments and different policy initiatives, parents have been required to exercise their rights and responsibilities. The problem is that for some parents (and their children) the flow of responsibility seems to be a one-way street. A problem with the ‘respect agenda’, identified by Gaskell (2008), is that it ‘... is based upon the assumption that citizens are respected by the state and society.’ (2008: 227). If this assumption were correct then it might be reasonable to expect that respected citizens exercise respect back. However many, including some of the parents in our study, may be caught up in the net of ‘shame’, the internalised response to inhabiting the ‘lower’ levels of an unequal society (Gaskell 2008). This structural lack of respect seems to be compounded by an individual lack of respect from service providers. These, it would appear, are ‘partners’ in name only.

However, the fact remains that if parents are to be held responsible then it is necessary (but not sufficient), that they be considered as capable of exercising such responsibility. If parents need to be ‘empowered’ to enable them to do the best for their children, then a place to start might be to ensure that the service providers tasked with making this happen do not unwittingly disempower parents further through, often unconsciously, positioning them as deficit. This is of course easier said than done, and

is complicated by the uncomfortable truth that in many cases the parents, or parenting of these young people *will* be deficient in some respects (indeed it is difficult to imagine any parent of any child for whom the same could not be said). However parents don't exist in a vacuum and parenting behaviour doesn't arrive without history. Perhaps if service providers had time to get to know the history of the families, understood as their *stories*, not the 'case history' found in files, then space may be created for more nuanced understandings of the family to be made. Of course the service providers also do not operate in a vacuum. The less time they have available, and the more competing demands on that time, the more likely it will be that they will slip into the short-hand caricaturising which the data presented in this paper suggest. If our key frontline staff are not afforded the time to reflect on contexts and build relationships then it is difficult to see how they can do anything but respond to crises and deal in oversimplifications.

While parents continue to be positioned generally in policy contexts as 'customers' it is clear that parents of permanently excluded pupils have fewer choices, and that often when they do try to make choices they are seen as non-compliant. For those who in addition are disadvantaged, able only to resist, the situation is even worse as their attempts to exercise choice are taken as evidence of poor parenting. Data from the 'resourceful' parents suggest that they understood what they were doing as attempting to exercise their choice, taking seriously their responsibility for finding out what was available and then asking for it to be provided. These parents, the 'pests', are construed as such because they make demands for resources (in terms of time, placements, specialist support) for their children. In the world of limited resources service providers have to make decisions not only about what is appropriate, but also what can be afforded. What causes these parents to be seen as troublesome is perhaps not so much what they keep asking for things, but that what they are asking for is not available.

For the other parents who were non-compliant it appeared that the only way open to them to exercise choice was to resist what they considered inappropriate options being imposed on them. However this seems to be interpreted by service providers as evidence of poor parenting rather than as the exercise of parental choice. Whilst refusing to accept a placement in the only provision in the area might appear

perverse to service providers, school choice literature on social class (e.g. Reay and Ball 1997) suggests that what constitutes a rational choice depends on the situation of the person choosing. In other words, the fact that parents do not agree with choices suggested for them is not in and of itself evidence that they are not choosing and choosing rationally given their situation. If we move away from normative assumptions about what the 'right' choice is, then it might also be possible to re-frame the 'non-compliant' behaviour of these parents as attempts to exercise choice. For the remaining group, the 'poor parents', it may be that their compliance is the expression of a choice they have made to trust the service providers to do what is best. However it is somewhat ironic that these parents, who could be seen as having abrogated responsibility for making decision about their child, are currently viewed in the most positive light.

In this paper we have drawn on new data to explore the experiences of parents of permanently excluded pupils and the way in which they are portrayed by service providers. We have noted that a limited range of 'parental identities' are evident in the casual talk of service providers and that none of them are positive. We have suggested that providing more time for service providers to sit alongside families and hear their stories, may reduce the extent to which families are seen in caricature, with more time for nuanced understanding. We have further argued that when the parental experience is examined through the lens of school choice literature a more positive framing of the parental role appears possible. Ultimately however, the re-framing of non-compliance as 'choice' will be a hollow exercise if it continues to be the case that for many of these children there is no real choice. If this analysis is correct it follows that any 'solution' must address resource issues more broadly than staff workloads.

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